DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 598 CS 002 684

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TITLE Black Language Patterns and Reading Instructions.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, April 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Theories; Elementary Education; *Language Patterns; *Language Styles; *Linguistic Theory; *Negro Dialects; *Negro Students; Nonstandard Dialects; *Reading Instruction; Standard Spoken Usage; Structural Linguistics

ABSTRACT

An approach to reading instruction utilizing communicative styles from the black community is suggested by the metatheoretical framework outlined in this essay. The social class constructs, language deficit models, case histories, surrealistic rhetoric and lyrical quality of black discourse can be conceptualized within the context of the following constructs: "Frame of mind," or a total view of language from a cultural standpoint; "Context," or the understanding of symbol development; "Structure," including lyrical quality, vocal artifact, and indirection; "Delivery," characterized generally by the extemporaneous mode; and "Implications," exploring the ramifications of the comprehensive metatheory for the art of teaching reading to black children. (KS)

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BLACK LANGUAGE PATTERNS AND READING INSTRUCTIONS

Molefi Kete Asante

Prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 21, 1976 at the St. Francis Hotel, San Francisco.

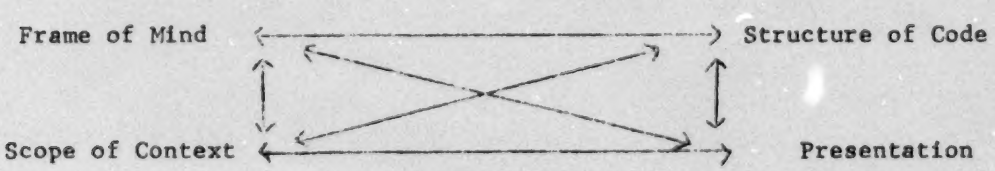
CS 002 684

It is the purpose of this essay to cover some old ground with a new tractor, digging perhaps where we have failed to dig before in the area of communicative styles and reading instruction. Thus I shall attempt to outline a philosophical frame for black patterns of communication and suggest how reading instruction can take advantage of these natural patterns. I hope to provide, therefore, a metatheoretical framework for black communication which could help provide an approach to reading instruction.

If it is accepted that practicable theories are developed on the basis of plausible coherent principles which explain certain phenomena, then clearly one function of a metatheory would be to accommodate principles for the explanation of theoretical phenomena related to black language. The various social class constructs, language deficit models, and case histories, as well as surrealistic rhetoric and the lyrical quality of black discourse style, can be successfully conceptualized within the framework of the metatheory.

The constituents of the metatheory are: frame of mind, scope of context, structure of code, and presentation. This set or fundamental frame allows us to be open to the infinite potentialities of black communication. The constituents of this metatheory aid us in determining the innovations in black communicative behavior. Diagrammatically the fundamental frames of the metatheory are represented as follows:

Metatheory



The significance of any metatheory is that it not only explains a given cluster of theories but also provides opportunity for enlarging human understanding generally. It is now possible to explore the relationship among the constitutents as they help to interpret the sweep of black language and discourse patterns.

A metatheory is no more valid than the theories which are consonant to it, or more exactly, those theories justify the metatheory. Insofar as I have chosen the metatheory on the basis of the theories, the metatheory has been decided upon in terms of the character of the theories. For example, the claim made by linguisticians that even when specific vocabularies are no longer employed, the phonological and morphological patterns of certain groups of Afro-Americans reflect as African past is consistent with the metatheoretical constituents. Yet also true is Henry Mitchell's contention that the prevailing rhetorical quality of the black preacher is lyrical.

FRAME OF MIND

It would be nonsense to argue that theories which emerge about black language and discourse can claim uniformity of black behavior. But the degree of variance among black is less than between blacks and non-blacks. Dixon and Foster have stated that six essential elements comprise the black referent: (1) the value of humanism, (2) the value of communalism, (3) the attribute of oppression/paranoia, (4) the value of empathetic understanding, (5) the value of rhythm, and (6) the principle of limited reward. (1971:10) I shall add a seventh element which is the principle of styling. So in talking about the black frame of mind we are talking about how certain social, creative, and psychological factors contribute to a total view of language.

In isolating any part of this language for linguistic or rhetorical (I mean at the simplest level, structural or persuasive) study, the frame of mind of the language user is important for analytical consideration. I know, for instance, that the black preacher, speaking in the proper frame of mind, "Jesus is my subject" is not the same as saying "Jee-sas is my subject." Baraka has made a similar observation regarding the singing of the song "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." "Clos-ter" was the precision word he heard in the black churches.

It is not my intention to discuss each of these elements; rather to concentrate on two elements that are more obviously related to the matter of language and rhetoric. The concepts of rhythm and styling seem indicative, in terms of our discussion, of the black frame of mind. Rhythm in spoken discourse is a basic measure of the successful black speaker. How well a speaker can regulate his flow of words with the proper pauses of audience identations becomes the standard for the black speaker before a basically black audience. Henry Mitchell knowingly refers to this as establishing "a kind of intimate fellowship." (Mitchell, 1971:185) Sound periodicity dictates the communicative terms of black language. The effective users of the language recognize, almost naturally, the need to employ some form of rhythm in vocal expression. Usually the speaker employs the characteristic style of his audience so that his cadences are familiar to his hearers. Martin Luther King utilized the spoken language of his followers and the "sounding good" quality frequently noted by observers contributed to his success. A basic element in sounding good is to know when not to sound. The rhetorical pause used so brilliantly by Malcolm X in his speeches is an essential factor in the black frame of mind as it relates to language.

But the regular recurrent clustering of tones according to accent and time value explains only a portion of the black frame of mind. Mitchell, perhaps more perceptive than others, has observed that the black style is dependent upon the audience's permissiveness. (Mitchell 1971:162). Most audiences (if allowed to be) are definers of communicative boundaries.

Styling refers to the conscious or unconscious manipulation of language or mannerisms to favorably influence the hearers of a message. A variety of behaviors are permitted to achieve the desired end. They may be classified according to the receiver's principal way of responding: (1) visual and (2) auditory. Visual styling is affected by gestural or symbolic mannerisms. While the most common type of gesture in communication is purposive movement for meaning and emphasis, conscious movement for styling is highly regarded by black speakers and hearers. Conventional gesticulation is concerned with description and emphasis as in "the fish was this size" or "the point is well made that...".

Symbolic mannerisms such as Martin Luther King touching the small upper pocket on his coat is a matter of visual styling. This gesture lends presence to the speaker who, in taking this liberty, says to the audience that he is not an average speaker but someone capable of handling his platform tasks with ease. Every speaker is not gifted with the ability to employ unconventional gestures during the speech. A certain amount of verbal skill accompanies the speaker who uses visual styling. Other forms of visual styling are environmental in the sense that they are connected to the principal constitutents of a rhetorical situation (speaker, message, and receiver) but are primarily effected by arrangement of physical surroundings or the sartorial habits of the speaker or his friends, e.g., black leather jackets of

Bobby Seale's staff, dashiki-clad youth on the platform behind Maulana Karenga, etc. It is the genius of the speaker that determines the quality of the visual styling.

What people hear is what we chiefly evaluate. Because of this the response to vocal clues is significant. These clues may take several forms, including variations of pronunciations, intercalations, and malaprops. Words are frequently intoned to give them a "soulful" quality. The behaviorists have yet to deal with that term but it can be illustrated. In an education meeting at Terre Haute, Indiana in 1968 a young black speaker, following Senator Vance Hartke, gave his view of education. He began by saying "education is for the C-O-M-M-U-N-I-T-Y. I mean com-mu-ni-ty." He was styling and every black person familiar with black preaching knew that the speaker had seized upon this stylistic device to have an impact.

Intercalations are the filler expressions which often appear as deliberate attempts at styling but become habitual with repeated use. In this category is "you know", the reigning American intercalation. However, among blacks there are several other expressions such as "lookit" and "hey" that have not found their way into the mainstreams because they are individualistic attempts at verbal styling. To be "cool" is to be capable of handling the verbal styling necessary to establish presence. Both rhythm and styling are major contributive factors in the black speaker's frame of mind as it relates to language. Thus, the intercalations manifest in styling are interrelated to rhythm as a recurring sound.

CONTEXT

A second constituent in a metatheory would be the contextual scope of

black language and rhetoric; it provides a basis for understanding how symbols are engineered. What are the social realities governing the development of black language? And what are the constraints upon black speakers to create new rhetorics?

The context, therefore, must be comprised of the historical as well as the present moment in terms of resources for bringing about new language styles. One can describe the coming to be of a new object or event, whether new words, innovative phrases, or the dozens, by considering the creation in the light of these questions. What resources are available to the black person in the American Society for inventing effective symbols? How does the inventing person recognize the effective use of symbols in a multiethnic society? What are the structuring considerations?

A speaker governs his use of language under tutelage from his audience for it is the audience that determines his effectiveness. Therefore, when King said "I've been to the Mountaintop" to a black audience in Memphis, it is something he would not perhaps, rhetorically speaking, say if he had been speaking before a white audience at, say, Harvard Law School. The constraints upon him were ethnically determined. Black audiences demand to hear certain expressions, to see certain things, and to enjoy certain kinds of humor. As Jack Daniel has pointed out, proverbs are a part of the black speaker's context as well. Good speakers find in their audiences the common places that are appealing. To say that is to say something about the folk talk within the black community whether it is "Your momma sure was good to me" or "Brothers and Sisters, we got a Rock on our side. Pray with me."

In yet another turn upon the scope of the context, arguments and stylistic devices are choices to be made within a certain framework for the black speaker.

Despite the infinite variations upon language, the number of arguments are contextually constrained. Little wonder that the arguments of Martin Luther King and James Farmer in the late 1950's sounded like the arguments of William Whipple in the 1830's; or that the positions taken by Malcolm X and Stokeley Carmichael were similar to those of Henry Highland Garnet and David Walker over a century before. Of course, changes in minute detail of style were present but the external reality with which these black rhetors dealt were basically unchanged. There could be no enlargement of argumentative possibilities for the black speaker without the corresponding enlargement, or better, alteration of the external reality. Clearly, therefore, black language and communication are framed by characteristic practices that are products of a special experience, environment, and heritage.

STRUCTURE

The structuring of the linguistic code is a creative task emanating from people's heritage. How ideas have been structured in the past dictates to a large extent how they will be structured in the future. Nuances are transmitted with the general fabric of the mores of a society. There are three components to code structuring in the rhetorical behavior of black Americans. They include a lyrical quality, vocal artifact, and indirection.

The Afro-American's approach to language is principally lyrical. Numerous examples have been descriptively documented indicating the expressive quality of the black preacher. But is not only the black preacher who combines brilliant imagination with music to make it a lyrical style; it also predominates among public platform orators whose roots are still firmly in the black community. The closer a black person moves to the white community psychologically, the further he moves from the lyrical approach to language.

Among organizing patterns for platform speaking, narration is the most consistent form for a lyrical attitude. Thus, the narrative, similar as it appears to the African storyteller's constructions, is most consonant to a lyrical approach to language. There is little wonder that black preachers are famous for sermons with titles such as "Dry Bones in the Valley," "The Three Hebrew Boys," "Daniel in the Lion's Den," "The Prodigal Son," etc. These lyrically pregnant stories are demonstratively presented with emphatic diversions to instruct audiences. They are not unlike the narratives of Ananse or Brer Rabbit in their transmission of values and ideas. In fact, it may be argued in an Herskovitian fashion that these folk preachers retained for their African audiences the basic elements of the storytellers and by applying their skills to new materials made the proverbs and folktales operative in an alien context. Black speakers tend to exhibit strong tendencies toward a lyrical approach to language which is structured accordingly.

Another aspect of code structuring has to do with vocal artifacts. What is conveyed here is the idea that words and their sounds are products of human workmanship and are, by this virtue, artifactitious. Intonation and tonal styling are substantive parts of most black communication. And the intelligent speaker knows that speaking is an emotional as well as an intellectual process, and that how one alters a phoneme or a word in vocal expression is significant. To know how to say "cat" or "man" is to know the secrets of word magic. In such a sense the black speaker knows what his ancestors knew with their use of Nommo, that all magic is word magic, and the generation and transformation of sounds contribute to a speaker's power. Thus, we are ready to say that whatever a speaker does with a word is a fact unto itself, apart from any reality the word has apart from the speaker. A speaker can alter the meaning

of a word "basically the way one can change the word yeh from simple response to stern challenge simply by moving the tongue slightly." (Jones, 1969:26) There are a number of one syllable sounds that are conductive to the black speaker's timbre and pitch: cat, say, man, yeh, hey, what, right, etc. What is unusual about these sounds is the specificity that accompanies them among blacks. The disc jockey who lives in the spirit of the people knows precisely what and how to say something.

Sound is a rhetorical artifact inasmuch as it has a certain effect upon the hearers. Thus, when a speaker concludes a speech, the statement "He sure sounds good" is a proper approbation. A listener states his approval of the energy (form and context being inseparable) expended in the speech. But the approbation is made with particular understanding of what glides and flights of sound were made. Effectiveness, therefore, is dependent upon vocal expression as a lasting impact, not upon gesture or supporting evidence, for obviously a speaker may claim evidence and perfect gesticulation and not be effective; whereas by appropriately modulating tones a speaker can make his evidence and gesticulation accomplish his ends.

The third component to code structuring, observable in stylistic development, is indirection. In speaking before a black audience the black speaker often approaches the central issues of his talk in a circuitous manner, in what might be called a rhetorical search mission. By stalking the issues like a hunter the speaker demonstrates his skill and arouses his hearers' interest. The person who goes directly to the issues is said to have little imagination and even less flair for rhetorical style.

Indirection is usually a matter of deduction as the speaker toys with related ideas and concepts before focusing on his prime target:

I am not a Politician, nor the son of a Politician
I am not a Republican, nor a Democrat
Nor an American.

In this typical Malcolm X passage we see the formula for indirection. What could have been simply put "I know that I am not an American" is more elaborately clothed. Such embellishment in public speaking can also be derived from the speaker's metaphorical capabilities, or illustrations, or aphorisms, or a combination of these techniques. But whatever the speaker's choice he is certainly playing in the right ball park if he surrounds his issue before focusing in upon it. This behavior is not merely true of the platform speaker but also plays a role in dyadic conversation, say, in a male-female relationship. This procedure cannot be identified with what is called "beating around the bush" because it is always on the bush, though at times tapping it exceedingly lightly. How the linguistic code is structured by the traditional black speaker is dependent upon the three components discussed above.

DELIVERY

The spoken discourse as practiced by black Americans is characterized by its artistic instrumentation. As an art form, the speech, frequently interrupted by vocal responses from the hearers, is made with careful attention to effect. Like African art of the highest order it is functional and is not made for art's sake alone but for its impact. Therefore, when audiences respond with outbursts of "Amen," "that's right," "Tell the Truth," "hey," etc., they are testifying to the impact of the delivery of the message. It is difficult to refer to these vocal outbursts as interruptions of the speech; more accurately they are affirmations. Speakers who succeed in arousing in

their audiences the desire to give vocal assent are prototypes for the black community. And the audiences' vocal affirmations, which are regulatory, comprise a monitoring system, (as feedback systems generally do) for effectiveness. This is similar to the common function of applause during certain American cultural events. When a speaker views delivery of a message as a performance, certain constraints and possibilities, that otherwise would not be, are placed upon him. Here then, it is not just the linguistic code that he, as a speaker, must concern himself with, but his presence as a speaker (appearance, countenance, grace, and manner). And presence is integrally related to how a man chooses to argue, contend, affirm, or entertain; and too, how the listener chooses to respond to his language. By using language common to the audiences a speaker is not merely understandable, he is credible. This explains the success of folk preachers and some platform militants. But delivery, pronunciatio, as it was called, however animated, cannot substitute for a speaker's genuine sensitivity to audiences. This holds for every dyadic communication situation whether speaker to audiences (many) or speaker to listener (one).

The kind of delivery indicates how a speaker regards his situation and audiences; that is, the choice of physical styles, e.g., pompous or conversational, reflects the rhetorical setting. Furthermore, the choice of modes, impromptu, manuscript, extemporaneous, or memorized, underscores the effect of situation and audiences upon speaker. The typical rhetorical setting is persuasive and the proper decisions of the speaker influence the persuasive impact on audiences. As a consideration for a metatheory of black language and communication it should be noted that black speakers generally prefer the extemporaneous mode of delivery characterized by lively speaking and

the coining of exact language at the moment of utterance. This is not to say that memorized speeches are unheard of, or that manuscript speeches are not given. When exactness of language and careful timing are essential, the speaker must react in a manner most suited to him. In most cases the manuscript speech serves a speaker's needs of exactness and definite timing. While presentation of a message is constrained by environmental conditions, it completes the speech act for the encoding person and is therefore essential to communication.

IMPLICATIONS

Attention to innovative techniques, which are largely the result of shifting variables in research studies, has obscured the premises upon which ability to read and the discrimination and combination of symbols into meaningful series ought to be found.

Significant influences from black cultural behavior suggest that black children's reading behavior could be linked to other verbal behaviors with positive results. While the ratiocination processes of all human beings function on the same basic principles, the environmental factors that have impact on learning situations may be radically different from one group to another. Communicationists have found connections between black public discourse, the folk preachers particularly, and certain African orishas and the pervasiveness of Nommo. The apodeictic certainly of such a relationship as described by these social scientists is applicable to reading instruction, particularly if we accept the assumption that people tend to follow through on learning by applying generally accepted practices and traditions to different situations and phenomena. In my view, two dichotomies must be in-

vestigated before we can make adequate models for teaching black children how to read. Joan Baratz' rather technical approach to how you substitute or augment language oehaviors of black children fails to get at the philosophical issue of how do we go about assessing whether or not we are teaching black children to read in the manner most adaptable to black cultural behaviors. Thus, sophisticated teaching instruments, guidebooks, and various electronic equipment, video and audio, may not be the key to modifying reading behavior. In fact, the prevalence of electronic media has caused a much too heavy reliance on technology and not enough on the communicative styles of children. The connection should have been made a long time ago between reading and speaking in the black community. In fact, the social sciences must begin to make the kinds of cross disciplinary connections that will inform the educational process. To do this they must develop a synthesis which will explain the systemic relationships rather than continue analysis which isolates knowledge. To speak of an communicative, systemic emphasis is to speak about a reliance on harmonies, cacophonies of events, multitudinous patterns, and an expressive approach to the world. The argument to be made here is that we must analyze the world view of the readers before we attempt to apply similar approaches to everyone. An evaluative instrument which can be used to isolate certain predispositions to read based upon several approaches not simply the constructionistic model must be developed. Only then is it possible to determine to what a given pupil population is more inclined to respond. Those who learn to read in spite of approaches which differ from their communicative styles might be considered similar to Chinese who learn English without the teacher knowing how best to present lessons in the framework of Chinese thought and philosophy. Cross cultural trainers have long

recognized the need to have potential overseas workers understand the communicative style of the people with whom they will be living and working. It is a reasonable response to cultural and environmental differences in society.

There is a certain ethnocentric bias to the conceptual styles in most educational approaches that may result in difficulty for the student or downright conflict. Rosalie Cohen's piece on "Conceptual Styles, Culture, Conflict, and Nonverbal Tests of Intelligence" in the American Anthropologist is instructive in this area. She discusses conceptual styles as rule-sets for the selection and organization of sense data. Understanding that different conceptualizations can result in messages being received differently, Cohen discovers two mutually incompatible conceptual styles--relational and analytic. Showing how these two styles are developed and reinformed in shared-function and formally organized primary groups is the basic task. Each style affects its carrier's ability to deal effectively with the alternate kind of group process requirements. Furthermore, culture conflict is different from culture difference inasmuch as groups which are mutually incompatible may be said to be in conflict. On the other hand, culture difference can be present and yet culture conflict avoided.

Schools that have not explored the cultural/environmental perspectives of their students may be introducing factors of dissonance and conflict rather than creating maximum learning conditions. One of the contentions of this paper is that reading instruction must not continue to be simple manipulations of variables that are themselves culturally bound but rather the exploration of the underlying assumptions of cross cultural education.

In evaluating the present state of the art of teaching reading to black

children several observations can be made in light of the foregoing discussion. Teachers of reading to black children, like teachers of language arts, spent a considerable amount of time on composition. This is not to say that composition should be dispensed with but rather to point out the cultural bias that requires a teacher to give students knowledge about what they were already capable of doing. The emphasis on classification would seem to suggest that by knowing what a verb or noun is a student will be able to "rap" better. Of course, this is not the case, particularly when the person using the language appropriates these classifications without knowing how they are designated. In the case of reading, the contemporary teacher is likely to have several pieces of sophisticated equipment that some creative researcher has designed with the help of the Ford Foundation to which he can turn to teach the kindergarten or elementary school pupils another form of composition. In preparation for this program I visited a classroom where two of my students were holding forth with eight special reading cases Sullivan's reading readiness books and about ten pieces of electronic equipment to do all kinds of fascinating things to help these pupils learn to read. One machine was designed to have a child look at a small screen and then write down the word he saw. Another machine was designed to have a child look through a binocular-like instrument with one eye closed, then the other, and to repeat the word that appeared on the screen. Reading instruction must accommodate the particular cultural/environmental perspective which influences behavior.

The metatheory which I have outlined of frame of mind, context, structure, and presentation can be integrated into the total fabric of reading instruction by utilization of communicative styles from the black community.

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